BYRON'S POLITICAL VERSE SATIRE

BY

CLAUDE WINSTON FAULKNER

A.B., Union College, 1936
A.M., University of Kentucky, 1938

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH
IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE
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PREFACE

The thesis summarized herein constitutes an extended study of Lord Byron's political verse satire. The first chapter treats Byron's satiric impulse; the second, his political interests and opinions; and the third, the types of satire he employed in his political verse. The fourth chapter gives a chronological survey of Byron's political verse satire, with particular attention being paid to the subjects he handled. And the fifth chapter presents my conclusions. In this abstract, summaries of these individual chapters appear under the chapter headings used in the thesis.

Concerning the investigation itself, I wish to emphasize that my thesis is based upon a detailed examination not only of Byron's poetry, but of all available evidence, including Byron's letters, journals, and recorded conversations. For, as my work progressed, it became increasingly evident that consideration merely of Byron's poetry leads not only to an imperfect understanding of his political verse satire but to a serious misconception of his political opinions, attitudes, and purposes.

In conclusion, I wish to express my gratitude to Professor Ernest Bernbaum, under whose helpful supervision my investigation was initiated, and to Professor Royal A. Gettmann, whose sympathetic interest and constructive criticism have been of inestimable value in the completion of the study.

C. W. F.

Urbana, Illinois
February, 1947

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CHAPTER I

Byron: The Satiric Impulse

Byron occasionally sets forth in his poetry the traditional claim that satire is moral in purpose, that the satirist should "make bad men better, or at least ashamed." However, there is ample evidence that he did not actually consider the mission of the satirist to be ethical and altruistic. In *Hints from Horace* (line 115) he says that satiric rhyme "first sprang from selfish spleen," and in *Don Juan* (XIII, 8) he observes:

> If I sneer sometimes,
> It is because I cannot well do less,
> And now and then it also suits my rhymes.
> I should be very willing to redress
> Men's wrongs, and rather check than punish crimes,
> Had not Cervantes, in that too true tale
> Of Quixote, shown how all such efforts fail.

Furthermore, his letters provide additional proof that Byron was no believer in the moral purpose of satire and certainly did not write his own satires to reform "bad men."

An examination of all of Byron's references to satire shows that he conceived of satire not as an instrument of reform but as a literary "weapon" to be used in striking at various persons, ideas, or institutions. He looked upon satire as a waging of "poetic war," and he viewed each bit of satire as a "blow" or an "attack."

The motivating forces behind Byron's satiric poetry are, of course, closely related to this concept of satire. Byron was moved to attack with the weapon of satire either to relieve some feeling of displeasure or simply to get some kind of pleasure. He was easily provoked to anger, and when angry he wanted revenge for whatever had provoked

him. Since he most often got his revenge through satirical attacks, a large portion of his satire is vindictive in origin. Much of his satire, however, must be charged up to a playful and mischievous nature, which found pleasure in satirizing merely for amusement. Byron was an expert in wielding his weapon of satire; and, like any other expert, he enjoyed exercising his talent, both because of the pleasure he derived from the activity itself and because of the pleasure he got indirectly from the admiration, amusement, and astonishment of those who witnessed his performance. With Byron, then, satirizing not only constituted a means of securing revenge but also served, apart from provocation or displeasure, as a very agreeable occupation.

Apparently, Byron made satiric attacks simply because he had "a little turn for Satire" and hence enjoyed satirizing. Of course, his pleasure was increased if he gained revenge through his satire. But, as John Galt pointed out, he had no motive but enjoyment, no "ulterior purpose." Byron himself writes in *Don Juan* (IV, 5):

> Some have accused me of a strange design
> Against the creed and morals of the land,
> And trace it in this poem every line:
> I don't pretend that I quite understand
> My own meaning when I would be *very* fine;
> But the fact is that I have nothing planned.
> Unless it were to be a moment merry—
> A novel word in my vocabulary.

And, certainly, if Byron had no

> . . . strange design
> Against the creed and morals of the land,

he equally had no missionary zeal to reform the creed and morals of the world. The truth about Byron's satire and satiric motivation lies between the views of those critics, particularly of his day, who call him entirely insincere and immoral, and the opinions of those others, particularly of our own day, who consider him wholly purposive and moral.

Actually Byron wrote whatever suited his purpose or fancy at the moment. He did not concern himself with either the morality or the consistency of his satiric attacks.

CHAPTER II

Byron: Political Interests and Opinions

During Byron's nonage his thoughts were turned to politics by a number of circumstances—especially the influence of his mother, his accession to the peerage, his experiences and friendships at Harrow and Cambridge, and the attack upon him in 1808 by the Whig *Edinburgh Review*. And when he came of age in 1809, he took his seat in the House of Lords with high hopes of becoming famous as an orator. However, he failed to fulfill his oratorical and political ambitions, a failure which he felt very keenly.

Despite the interest Byron showed in the superficialities of politics and the aspirations he had for parliamentary fame, he lacked a real knowledge of politics, did not seriously care to obtain such knowledge, was none too sincere in his politics, and had few, if any, positive political convictions. To this "indifference on the subject altogether," as he termed it, Byron gave credit for the fact that he was more consistent in political matters than in anything else. His consistency in politics, however, amounted to little more than a nominal adherence to the Whig party, an almost invariable attitude of opposition to practically everything (which often made him inconsistent in his expressed opinions), and a perennial inclination to celebrate in his poetry the cause of liberty.

Since his political opinions were neither systematic nor unvarying, his political satire does not in any way form a coherent, organized body of political criticism. He was a political satirist; he was not, nor did he fancy himself to be,

a political philosopher. He gave effective expression to many political ideas, but he seems to have felt that the effectiveness of the expression was of more importance than the ideas expressed.

CHAPTER III

Byron: Types of Political Verse Satire

In the way in which Byron employs the various types of satire—ironic satire, burlesque, and invective satire—his impulsiveness and emotionalism are apparent. Although his feelings were changeable and contradictory, he always felt strongly about even trivial matters and was thus inclined to make his political attacks direct and violent throughout his writing career. Consequently, in his political verse satire he shows a distinct preference for invective satire.

When he writes ironic political verse satire, he usually presents ironic satire labeled as such or otherwise made unmistakable, intermixes ironic satire with invective satire (with the latter predominant), or shifts completely from ironic to invective satire. There is rarely any sustained employment of cool, impersonal, detached irony.

Similarly, in Byron's burlesque political verse satire—notably *The Vision of Judgment*—there is a liberal interfusion of invective satire. And it is the invective satire which sets forth the bulk of Byron's political commentary. Obviously, Byron—although he was an able writer of burlesque, as *The Vision of Judgment* testifies—did not like to depend upon so genial a form as incongruous imitation for the expression of his political animadversions. For his "intellectual wars" he preferred the stout ash club of invective to the laughing gas of burlesque.

It was invective political verse satire, then, which Byron

preferred and in which he excelled. In the devices of invective—which are merely such devices of effective writing as alliteration, contrast, parallelism, and figures of speech—Byron was very proficient, and he used these devices to say what he meant—directly, forthrightly, often harshly.

All in all, it is clear that when Byron had something to say in the way of political criticism he usually said it in invective satire. As he himself puts it, in *Don Juan* (XI, 88):

> Ne'er doubt
> *This*—when I speak, I *don't hint*, but *speak out.*

CHAPTER IV

Byron: Political Verse Satire—A Chronological Survey

The political verse satire written by Byron before he began his active career in parliament in 1811 is random and occasional; it is coherent and consistent only in its dealing with popular topics and in its attitude of opposition. Byron's first passage of political satire, which occurs in "Granta: A Medley," treats the campaign of Petty and Palmerston, a current Cambridge topic, and attacks both candidates in a non-partisan fashion and apparently without provocation. The political satire of *English Bards, and Scotch Reviewers* is, for the most part, directed at the Whigs of Holland House. Characteristically, the motivation is vindictiveness rather than ideological disagreement; only superficial aspects of politics are treated; and no breadth of political knowledge is indicated. The first two cantos of *Childe Harold* include political satire upon several subjects of current interest, but neither Byron's point of view nor his motivation is clear; the pro-British sentiments of the first canto yield to the assault upon "Britannia" in the second. The meager political satire of *Hints from Horace* is merely a conventional bit of ridicule of Pitt. And the satire of *The Curse of Minerva*

consists of a short-sighted and inconsistent attack upon Elgin and a satiric treatment of popular phases of British foreign and domestic policy. In this last passage of political satire we perhaps see the aspiring Whig statesman sharpening his satiric weapons preparatory to condemning in parliament all of the activities of the Tory ministry both at home and abroad. At least, it is certain that upon his return to England Byron had ambitions to become a parliamentary politician of note, not—despite his dabbling of the past several years—a political satirist. Poetry he considered merely a preparation for oratory in parliament.

Byron arrived in England in July, 1811, and for a time he unsuccessfully attempted to achieve his political ambitions. The most obvious fact concerning his political satire during this period from 1811 until his exile in 1816 is that he was not trying to make a name for himself as a political satirist. For, though he wrote a number of poems containing political satire during these years, he did not intend any of them to be published under his own name and did not expect some of them to be published at all. Evidently Byron planned throughout this period that his political fame should come through oratory rather than through political satire.

However, his first impulse seems to have been to use his poetic abilities anonymously in the press to advance his political career—as in his "Ode to the Framers of the Frame Bill" and his "Sympathetic Address to a Young Lady." Both of these poems were written to strengthen a political cause in which Byron was interested. These tactics he soon abandoned, but he continued to attack those politicians who had crossed him in his parliamentary activities. And he seems to have added to his own prejudices those of his friend Thomas Moore, who was already a satirist of liberal sympathies. Ideologically he, like Moore, followed the Opposition party line throughout this period. Not long after the end of his active political career in 1813, Byron left off writing political satire. And in April, 1816, he

departed from England, never to return.

Soon after his departure from England, Byron resumed writing political verse satire and produced frequent satiric political attacks until he left Italy for Greece in 1823. The political satire written by Byron during the period from 1816 until 1821 (the year of composition of *The Irish Avatar* and *The Vision of Judgment*) shows no particular change in approach or attitude in comparison with his previous work. The stanzas on Waterloo in the third canto of *Childe Harold*, like the political satire of the first canto composed years before, merely treat satirically a topic of current interest directly connected with the travels of Childe Harold. The final canto of the poem resembles the first and third in its "invectives against tyranny," and the political satire of the *Ode on Venice* is in a similar vein. "My Boy Hobbie O," the "Song of the Luddites," the epitaphs for Castlereagh and Pitt, and the epigrams on Cobbett, Hobhouse, and Queen Caroline—like many of the political satires of Byron's middle period—were impromptus which were not intended for publication. And the political satire of both *Beppo* and the first five cantos of *Don Juan* is casual and incidental. Byron still shows no serious desire to present a unified, coherent criticism of politics; he simply satirizes political matters according to the whim of the moment.

The writing of *The Irish Avatar* in September, 1821, marks the beginning of a period in which Byron displayed intensified activity in political satire, but there is still no significant change in his aims or methods. *The Irish Avatar* is perhaps most notable for its style. Neither the passage of time nor the writing of *Beppo* and five cantos of *Don Juan* had mellowed Byron's political satire; he still preferred invective and "the high Roman fashion." This preference is further indicated not only by his epigrams on Castlereagh in *The Liberal* but by *The Vision of Judgment*. As we have previously noted, although the general form of the latter poem is burlesque, practically all of the significant political

satire in it is invective. Cantos VI-XII of *Don Juan*, written in 1822, are "full of politics," and Cantos VII-VIII contain an extended condemnation of war. Many of the other political topics in this portion of *Don Juan* Byron had treated previously, and as usual there is a certain amount of insincerity and inconsistency in the satire which he presents. *The Age of Bronze*, the last poem which Byron devoted entirely to political satire, is most noteworthy for its dependence upon Juvenalian "sternness and contempt" to give force to its satire. In writing this poem, Byron seems to have somewhat purged himself of political irritants, for the final cantos of *Don Juan*, written in the early part of 1823, contain little political satire—and that little is more social than political.

With the composition of these cantos, Byron had ended his career as a political verse satirist; for his activity in the Greek Revolution turned his attention from political verse to political action, and his untimely death forever stilled his pen.

CHAPTER V

Conclusion

In *The Spirit of the Age* Hazlitt wrote that Byron

> . . . chiefly thinks how he shall display his own power or vent his spleen, or astonish the reader either by starting new subjects and trains of speculation, or by expressing old ones in a more striking and emphatic manner than they have been expressed before. He cares little what it is he says, so that he can say it differently from others.

This analysis seems to be particularly valid with regard to Byron's political verse satire. He is quite likely to express certain ideas simply because they "tell devilish well in a

stanza"; he often lets his wit run away with his sentiments; and he is often motivated by non-political considerations. As we have seen, he does not much care what political ideas he expresses; it is the expression of them and the effect of the expression upon the reader that concern Byron.

His lack of serious purpose, his shallowness, and his inconsistency do not, of course, actually lessen the literary value of Byron's political verse satire. He may present conflicting views or write political satire for personal rather than ideological reasons. But, in any event, his expression of various ideas is superlative.

What must be insisted upon, though, is that the political ideas expressed by Byron in his poetry do not necessarily reflect his actual beliefs or indicate his character. He expressed a variety of political ideas and expressed them well. But he himself said that he had "no fixed opinions," and he readily admitted that what he printed was not always what he really thought. Byron's political verse satire, therefore, must not be taken at face value; it should rather be taken *cum grano salis.*

VITA

Claude Winston Faulkner, son of James Edward and Eulah (Swearingen) Faulkner, was born on April 24, 1916, in Barbourville, Kentucky, where he attended grammar school and high school, graduating from the latter in May, 1932. In the fall of 1932 he entered Union College, Barbourville, Kentucky, and received the A. B. degree from that institution in May, 1936. He took additional courses there in the summer of 1936. During his last three years at Union College, he was laboratory instructor in chemistry. In September, 1936, he enrolled in the graduate school of the University of Kentucky and in June, 1938, received the A. M. degree in English from that university.

In the fall of 1938, he entered the graduate school of the University of Illinois and in September, 1939, began teaching as an assistant in the English department. In February, 1942, he was granted military leave of absence from the University of Illinois and served with the Army Air Forces until July, 1946. Meanwhile, on December 9, 1944, he married Nancy McCallum. Since his return to the University he has been instructing in the English department and completing requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English.